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FOR PUBIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Nuclear Terrorism

SUSAN STAMBERG: At an international conference in Washington this week, the talk has been about how terrorists might get control not of airplanes, but of nuclear weapons. Today some of those attending the meeting discussed ways of preventing international terrorists from going nuclear.

Bruce Gellerman reports.

BRUCE GELLERMAN: The experts agree the threat of nuclear terrorism is real. For example, from 1969 to '75 there were 240 bomb threats against U.S. nuclear facilities. Fourteen were actually attempted.

The experts also agree the key to preventing terrorists from going nuclear is intelligence-gathering, identifying plots before they're put into effect.

But today at the Conference on Nuclear Terrorism, Republican Senator Jeremiah Denton called the United States's policy on terrorism fragmented, our intelligence-gathering ability only partially developed. Denton, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, wants to bolster federal laws restricting the Freedom of Information Act and requiring nuclear power plant employees to go through tough security checks.

Some attending the conference were fearful that such an approach would mean the first casualty in a war against nuclear terrorism could be our democratic ideals.

Bernard O'Keefe is head of the company that makes krytons, timing devices for nuclear weapons.

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BERNARD O'KEEFE: I don't think if you find a terrorist with a ticking bomb about to go off and demolish Washington, that you read him his Miranda rights. I do believe that there will in the future be a question of survival versus civil liberties.

GELLERMAN: O'Keefe also believes prevention is the first line of defense against nuclear terrorism, and says the U.S. should closely cooperate and trade intelligence information with the Soviet KGB.

Ray Cline, former CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence, didn't like the idea.

RAY CLINE: We do get lots of information from the KGB, but it's totally unreliable.

GELLERMAN: If intelligence does not detect a plot against a nuclear facility, the next step is to insure terrorists can't get a nuclear weapon or the materials to make a bomb. The experts assume terrorists will try to steal a bomb before trying to build one.

A 1978 CIA study identified Western Europe's nuclear weapons storage depots as the most vulnerable and likely target for future terrorists. The U.S. recently beefed up security around the nuclear warheads stationed in Europe. But even if terrorists were actually able to steal a warhead, the bombs are equipped with fail-safe devices, rendering them useless to those without the proper codes. The system is called PAL, the permissive action link.

Unfortunately, says Harold Agnew, former Director of the Los Alamos Laboratory, not all of the 25,000 nuclear weapons in the world have PAL.

HAROLD AGNEW: I think they all should have them. And I've advocated for a long time that this technology should be made available worldwide to any nuclear power, providing they agree that they will implement it or some form of it.

GELLERMAN: What to do if terrorists are able to steal a nuclear bomb and know how to set it off? Well, there's NEST, the Nuclear Emergency Search Team. It has experts equipped with devices to locate missing weapons. Unfortunately, even the best equipment can be fooled, and it's easy to hide a nuclear bomb.

The Swiss have come up with another answer: head for the hills.

Andre Kleineman (?) is head of Switzerland's civil defense. He says his country has carved shelters into the Alps.

ANDRE KLEINEMAN: We need shelter for everybody because we can't evacuate because we don't have the land to evacuate to. And, of course, we can use these shelters also for other things, for a natural disaster or a man-made disaster, you see.

GELLERMAN: There's a place in a shelter for each Swiss national. The idea has its appeal, but the American approach is different. We would try to relocate people in an emergency.

Louis Giuffrida is the head of our Emergency Management Agency. He says the Swiss plan would not be practical for the United States.

LOUIS GIUFFRIDA: That's not really a fair comparison. It would be an almost impossible task for us to build a shelter for 250 million people.